

CONSIDERING (IM)POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN INTERNET RELAY CHAT OPENING SEQUENCES

Šárka Hastrdlová

Abstract

Certain rules are observed taking place during conversation openings in a synchronous Internet Relay Chat (IRC) interaction. It is recognized that through openings a chat participant gives the main impression and positive or negative signal to other participants in a chatroom. However, it is assumed that opening techniques known from face-to-face communication will play a smaller role in the overall interaction and their violation will not be viewed so sternly. The question thus remains whether politeness/impoliteness strategies on IRC differ from those in a standard face-to-face conversation and what counts as polite/impolite in a chatroom. The politeness theory of Watts (2003) has been chosen for its novel approach. The article briefly outlines a body of research carried out in IRC openings and shows results of the analysis of various methods of openings found in the corpus.

Key words

opening strategies, politeness theory of Watts, politeness, impoliteness, appropriateness, efficiency

1 Introduction

The language of the Internet has recently attracted the attention of many linguists (Baron 1984, 1998, Condon & Cech 1996, Herring 1996, 2001, Werry 1996, Jones 1998, Cairncross 1999, Crystal 2001, Yus 2001, Quero 2003, Neuage 2004, Giltrow & Stein 2009), which is a natural tendency thanks to the massive development of this media and its worldwide usage. Various topics can be found dealing with virtual community life, politeness on the net, computer-mediated dialogue, humour in computer-mediated communication or framing and face in Internet exchanges. The fact that thousands of people all over the world can be connected to the Internet at the same time and communicate beyond physical barriers must alter the way of communication and the organization of interactions. The proliferation of virtual communities, namely IRC, Internet Relay Chat (further IRC), in recent years has resulted in the creation of new social spaces and new forms of interaction, identity formation and expression. The aim of this article is first to acquaint the reader with the research done in IRC opening sequences and then consider politeness/impoliteness techniques

that chatroom participants utilize. There are two main research questions going beyond the whole analysis:

- 1) How do specific conditions, such as anonymity, social distance and seeming equality on IRC affect conversation techniques and strategies in this medium, namely openings?
- 2) How do politeness/impoliteness strategies on IRC differ from those in a standard face-to-face conversation and what counts as polite/impolite on IRC?

The research is based on a corpus containing records of a chatting from chatrooms. The corpus is presented in the following section.

2 Corpus analyzed

I conducted my analysis on a corpus containing 793 IRC messages taken from the chat provider www.hotmail.com. My choice of collecting a particular number of messages, rather than using the standard method of collecting a particular number of words draws on various studies on IRC that based their research on a number of messages in the corpus rather than number of words, which is usual for a research in oral and written communication (Kwang-Kyu Ko 1996, Greenfield & Subrahmanyam 2003, Panyametheekul & Herring 2003, Ahti & Lähtevänoja 2004). Panyametheekul and Herring (2003), for example, collected 917 messages for their analysis, Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) worked with 137 messages. In the article a basic research unit then is a message which is defined as instantly communicated written information sent by one participant of a chatroom and delimited by the moment when the text is conveyed to the monitors of other chat participants.

My data are in the form of a transcript of conversations; the main aim was to capture the speech situation in the chatroom as naturally as possible. No correction in terms of grammar and spelling mistakes was made. The original typed conversations were in different colours and fonts, which I modified as these elements were not relevant to my study and they were of inferior quality for reading. I have transformed the original printout into a record using the Microsoft Word programme and numbered the lines/messages to make the conversational threads easier to follow and clearer to present in examples. Arranging this corpus, ethical issues were also considered (Johnstone 2000, Valeš 2010). However, for obvious reasons it was not possible to receive an informed consent of the human subjects involved. To respect privacy we decided to change all the nicknames as recommended in Valeš (2010: 50).

3 Research on internet relay chat openings

This section outlines the significance of openings for conversation and discusses some theories concerning Internet Relay Chat. In addition, a closer investigation is made of different types of openings found in my corpus, as well as some specific techniques that differentiate IRC communication from face-to-face interaction. At the same time politeness and impoliteness strategies used are discussed. Openings can be considered a subgroup of adjacency pairs having first pair parts and second pair parts. The focus is on Summons-Answer sequences (SA), greeting-return of greeting (Gr-Gr), question-answer (QA), and the notion of pre-sequences, such as the existence of pre-conversational openings (PcO). We mainly draw on Schegloff's (1968) model of telephone openings, Schifffrin's model of opening encounters (1977) and studies dealing with Internet Relay Chat openings (Rintel et al. 2001, Ahti & Lähtevänoja 2004).

With a view to the above-mentioned facts, a brief description of the situation on IRC is necessary. There are many participants speaking at the same time, thus we can say its structure is multi-focus. Their utterances overlap and do not constitute a clearly organized text. It does not seem easy for the participants to enter and guarantee themselves direct attention from the others in this disordered form of conversation. It was observed that very few opening greetings, comments or questions on IRC gained any response at all (Ahti & Lähtevänoja 2004, Rintel et al. 2001). In their study, only one third of the chat participants gained a response to their greeting. Internet chat fulfils primarily a social or phatic function as a source of fun, relaxation, meeting new people, dating, cybersex and looking for a partner. By phatic, I follow the terminology of Malinowski (1972) where he describes phatic communion as establishing ties of personal union between people. This role of IRC must unavoidably be reflected in the opening phrases used. Furthermore, investigating (im)politeness strategies, or appropriateness of openings in the situational context will be one of my primary goals.

When Schegloff (1968) regards the ringing of the telephone as the first pair part of a Summons-Answer sequence, the same applies to IRC and the automatic joining signal (AJS) or automated joining event (AJE) as it is called by Rintel et al. (2001). This signal shows who has entered the chatroom and who has returned (e.g. *Tonybx2 has joined the conversation; pavinjohn11 has returned*). Its function is informative; to notify present chat participants that another member has come in. The AJS has several similarities to the telephone ring. As Rintel et al. (2001) say: "Both are produced as a result of a conscious action of one interactant..., both provide feedback about the attempted connection to another person...both signal only that interaction is possible not that it has begun". On

the other hand, the ring sets up the condition of non-terminality while an answer to the broadcast of AJS is not conditionally relevant. That means that it does not have to necessarily complete the Summons-Answer sequence. AJS can also be called identification displays (Schiffrin 1977). By entering the chatroom, a newcomer gives a signal to other chat participants that he or she is ready to chat. Further, it can be regarded as an ‘attention-getting device’ (Schegloff 1968). It equals the situation when the ringing telephone indicates that there is a caller who wishes to speak to someone.

Another attention-getting device worth mentioning is a (CA) contact advertisement (Ahti & Lähtevänoja 2004), as the following example from the corpus indicates:

- (1) *152. togooodtobtrue:22 m mn (it means 22 years old male from Minnesota)*

Contact advertisements on IRC are similar to newspaper advertisements. They are a typical feature of IRC and are hard to imagine in face-to-face conversation or on the phone. It seems that these contact advertisements on IRC could be well regarded as a summons. Three types of IRC summonses were distinguished in the corpus:

- 1) looking for people of the same nationality or from the same town or region;
- 2) on-line dating or soul mates, as it is sometimes called; they are similar to newspaper
 - a. advertisements, ‘lonely hearts’ columns;
- 3) contact advertisements seeking a sexual relationship.

I turn now to considering the problem of social recognition displays on IRC. They represent in Firth’s (1964: 69) words part of an opening ‘ritual’ in face-to-face conversation and are sensed as pre-sequences to further conversation. This means that certain utterances are usually ‘precursors’ to another utterance or a sequence of utterances. The identification of pre-conversational openings in the given corpus of data was a complex task. The problem was to identify what serves as a pre-opening and a recognition display on IRC. Finally, the theory of Richards and Schmidt (1983) was taken into consideration. It views greetings in a face-to-face conversation as invitations for further talk and therefore categorizes greetings within the group of pre-conversational openings. The analysis presented in this article will show whether greetings on IRC function in the same way.

There is no doubt that in a real conversation, greetings can serve different purposes, for example as mere identification displays. Usually they are conditionally relevant. When the first pair part is produced, the next turn has an expected interpretation projected on it. Greetings are repeatable. If a speaker judges that a second pair part has not been achieved at all according to the rule, then the first act can be reinstated. For example, if someone clearly did not hear a greeting, then the greeting can be repeated. IRC is specific in that it enables people to continue opening conversations as many times as they wish. It can be a greeting, a question or addition of a second pair part – which means joining the conversation flow directly. In contrary to face-to-face conversation, however, on IRC, it is not expected that if a newcomer greets the room, all participants will return the greeting. Such behaviour is technically impossible, as the vast number of greetings would flood the screen (Crystal 2001). Furthermore, some greetings in the corpus were overlooked. This event supports my assumption that it is not a matter of impoliteness or a lack of cooperation not to receive initial greetings by other members of the Internet chatroom. Even if the QA opening sequence might be considered pre-conversational as well, it is placed into a separate category. Such division enables me to observe whether any further topics were provided by means of a greeting only or by means of initial questioning.

4 IRC opening sequences – brief analysis

The following groups of openings were investigated:

- 1) Summons-Answer sequence (automatic joining signal, contact advertisements)
- 2) Pre-conversational Openings (greeting-return of greeting – directed to all versus directed to one person)
- 3) Question-Answer (opening questions)

It is necessary to point out that (im)politeness phenomena are discussed in each group separately, then the summary is made in conclusion.

4.1 Summons-Answer sequence

I have already specified that on IRC the following kinds of summonses can be found: the automatic joining signal (AJS) or a specific IRC opening signal “... has returned” and contact advertisements. Regarding AJS the main task was to find out how many times this signal gains a response from other chat participants, that is whether it draws the attention of others or whether newcomers open the conversation first. The idea was to specify the rules or rituals, should there be

any. AJS, in my opinion, may be problematic since it cannot be considered a real opening strategy. Every person that enters the chatroom has to use this signal. Even if I included it in SA opening strategies, I placed it in brackets or italics. My further intention regarding Summons-Answer sequence is also to demonstrate what is considered (im)polite, or in Watts's (2003) words political or appropriate behaviour in IRC openings. I divided this feature into AJS without any response, AJS that gained a response, AJS where a newcomer opened conversation first and AJS after which a newcomer mingled in the discussion without any opening phrase. In these situations, AJS can be interpreted as a first pair part and a potential answer as a second pair part of a conversation. Contact advertisements were analyzed in the same way.

Referring to the research, Table 1 shows crucial differences in opening types. As clearly evident, 82 per cent (89 occurrences) of the total are AJS without any response or further opening. This means people enter the chatroom and then leave without any contribution. I further assumed that this fact supported the hypothesis that it is not impolite to avoid any opening phrase or greeting on IRC or come and leave without saying anything.

OPENING – AJS	Corpus
AJS without any response or further opening	89
AJS that gained response	0
AJS where a newcomer opened conversation first	16
AJS without any opening phrase but further conversation	3
opening signal “.... has returned”	1
TOTAL	108

Table 1: Opening by means of AJS

Surprisingly, the occurrence of *AJS that gained response* is none. While the telephone ring sets up the condition of non-terminality, an answer to the broadcast of AJS is not conditionally relevant. That means that it does not have to necessarily complete the Summons-Answer sequence, which is the case here. There is no record of a situation that a newcomer joining the chatroom conversation would receive a greeting or any response first in the corpus specified. The reason for a zero occurrence may also lie in the noise in the channel and quick changing of messages. The tempo is very fast and that disables participants' ability to see newcomers joining the room easily even if the word JOIN is capitalized. Further, the other 14 per cent (16 occurrences) are chat participants who open a conversation themselves in a form of greeting or contact advertisement, thus not forming a second pair part of a Summons-Answer sequence but rather

summons+greeting/contact advertisement sequence. The following example shows how IRC may work in this respect. AJS is directly followed by a greeting of the same chat participant (lines 93, 94).

- (2) 93. *Tweakdup1 has JOINED the conversation.*
 94. *Tweakdup1: what's up room (Greeting)*

Finally, the last group of Summons-Answer sequence shows three occurrences of *AJS without any opening phrase but further conversation*, as the following example indicates. Note the time lag between individual messages:

- (3) 19. *FatalisticHomeRun has joined the conversation.*
 33. *FatalisticHomeRun: abuse?*

The example above provides evidence of another dimension of conversation on IRC where the participants are not required to greet others but naturally mingle in the ongoing conversation without any face-threats. Neither is it viewed impolite by other participants. On the contrary, positive evaluation by other chat participants is obvious since FatalisticHomeRun and SpecialED are not only the most active chatters, but also participants to whom other chatters turn most frequently in the corpus. I can say that such behaviour is appropriate to the context of the interactional situation. After being unsuccessful in their AJS summons, some chat participants turn to multiple summonses such as contact adverts, or to other opening strategies (see the example below from my corpus).

- (4) 677. *Lunarwolfs has JOINED the conversation.* (AJS)
 678. *Lunarwolfs: hey people whats up* (the first phatic question)
 679. *LINDSAY: it sure is*
 680. *LINDSAY: since its so unlively, wanna buy some makeup or skin care from me?*
 681. *LINDSAY: orrrrr...microdermabrasion?*
 682. *SWEETANGELEYES: no thanks, i don't wear make-up much*
 683. *LINDSAY: thats the best...gotta take care of ya skin*
 684. *Lunarwolfs: how is everyone doing today* (the second phatic question)

With a view to the above-mentioned facts, it can be claimed that the specificity of IRC is that it enables people to continue opening conversations as many times as they wish. It can be a greeting, a question or addition of a second pair part – which means joining the conversation flow directly. It is quite usual not to gain

any response at all to any opening technique, as it can be seen from the examples above. From the point of view of (im)politeness it can be said that the use of strategies for joining IRC conversation can be interpreted as politic conduct and thus appropriate for this type of medium.

4.2 Pre-conversational openings – greeting

The initial hypothesis is that greetings on IRC are regarded as precursors to further talk. It is also crucial to stress that according to ‘netiquette’ participants are advised not to greet every person in the channel individually. They are advised to wait and “listen” to the channel first to get the feel of the topic, the culture of the group. While in a face-to-face conversation it would be inappropriate not to greet everyone when you enter the room and use only contact advertisements, on IRC it is within the limits of appropriateness and even expected. I have found usual and appropriate types of greeting formulae recognized from a face-to-face interaction; these are not extraordinary greetings that would be typical only of IRC. However, it can be inferred that on IRC such greetings may represent something extraordinary, positively marked or in excess of what is required by the situational context. In his theory, Watts (2003) sees greetings as EPMs (expressions of procedural meaning) that are highly ritualised and have become pragmaticalised. He further states that EPMs are part of politic behaviour; when they are not present their absence may be interpretable as impoliteness, and when they are in excess of what is required by the situation, they may be regarded as politeness. This would imply that greeting formulae on IRC are polite and not only appropriate as in face-to-face.

For the purpose of clarity, greetings were divided into two groups: greetings to all chat participants-response to a greeting – *hi room, hello everyone*; and greetings to one person-response to a greeting – *hi Lindsey, hello fatal*. The results of the survey represented by Table 2 show that in the corpus there is a higher frequency of occurrence of greeting to one, using a nickname (19 occurrences) than greeting to all (13 occurrences). Interestingly, though, there are no greetings directed to one person immediately after AJS.

	Corpus	
	No response	Gained response
Greeting to ALL	8	5
Greeting to ONE	10	9

Table 2: Greetings-returning greetings in the corpus

All chat participants that enter the chatroom make a general greeting addressed to all participants (*hello to all, hi room, mornin*, etc.), which is in variance to Crystal's (2001) observation mentioned above that greetings directed to all are usually not welcomed and left unresponded. Then, whether they gain a response or not, they further address the selected participant by a nickname and possibly develop further conversation. On a horizontal level, there is a significant difference between *greeting to all* and *greeting to one*. More responses were gained when only one participant was addressed and greeted (9 occurrences) than when the whole room was greeted (5 cases). This finding is in accordance with the research made by Ahti and Lähtevänoja (2004) where they examined 60 openings and finally stated that "a large amount of collectively addressed openings do not gain a response in a chatroom, whereas individually addressed openings gain a response each time they are used" (ibid.: 42).

The ultimate concern mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is in viewing opening greetings as an invitation for further talk. The question is whether IRC greetings lead to further discussion and therefore can be regarded as pre-conversational openings. In a real conversation, greetings are considered either the lowest degree of conversation, that is, topic-initiating or just social identification displays. Interestingly, IRC with its absence of audio-visual means operates in similar dimensions. It is observed that greetings on IRC in the majority of cases serve either as an invitation for further talk (4 cases) or only as a phatic element fulfilling a social function (10 cases).

As I said above, chat participants engage in the chatroom conversation with different previous experience but with similar expectations. Some of them bring, or would like to bring, into the IRC conversation elements of face-to-face interaction; however, it functions in a different way. I have not found any greeting sequences inappropriate to the IRC environment even if they vary significantly from oral interaction. That is, I do not consider no response to a greeting on IRC impolite or as a face-threatening act but rather view this conduct as specific of cyberculture. It can be said that for the conversation to be successful, chat participants have to struggle more and utilize more opening strategies than in face-to-face conversation.

4.3 Question-answer sequence

The question-answer adjacency pair, in other words Personal Inquiry (McLaughlin 1984), represents another opening sequence. It is a part of a social recognition display together with a greeting. In a spoken conversation the 'ritual' questions, or greeting formulae, such as *How are you?* or more informal

What's up? are considered as part of the required politic behaviour. These are topic-initiating questions or are regarded as 'greeting substitutes' (Sacks 1995: 554). I also suppose their occurrence on IRC since chat participants carry the experience and knowledge from spoken conversations into this medium. They want to establish relationships or initiate further conversation; especially, because chat, being an anonymous and a mass medium, is not directed at one person but at more participants. My other assumption is that the absence of personal contact in IRC conversation and anonymity will result in a relatively high degree of straightforwardness reflected in the content and the form of the opening question. What would be regarded as impolite and too direct in face-to-face conversation is viewed appropriate to the ongoing social interaction on IRC. Given the absence of audio-visual cues on IRC, questions that allow users to obtain information about the identity of a potential conversation partner may be quite frequent. Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) call them 'slot-filler codes' and their variant on IRC is a conversation opener a/s/l (age, sex location). It might be noted that age and sex are the most universal markers of social roles. I focus on the following types of opening questions:

- 1) The first contact questions; participants wish to know more information about age, sex, location (abbreviation *asl*) of other participants (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam 2003).
- 2) Phatic questions; I supposed these initial questions to be *How are you?* and similar types creating an imagination of togetherness and the sense of belonging to a group (Rintel et al. 2001).
- 3) Establishment questions; more direct questions such as *Who are you?*, *Do I know you?*, *Where are you from?*, *What do you do?* with the help of which the first contact is established and further conversation can develop (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam 2003).

Table 3 shows that the primary assumption proved correct in terms of higher frequency of occurrence of phatic questions. Questions like *How are you?* *What's up room?* are the most frequently used opening questions in the corpus.

	Corpus
First contact questions	4
Phatic questions	9
Establishment questions	6
Total	19

Table 3: Types of questions and their occurrence rate in the corpus

Establishment questions according to my assumption play the second most important role in establishing relationship on IRC. Finally, the first contact questions appeared to be the least frequent. I suppose the reason lies in the fact that they sound too direct even in the anonymous environment of chatting although they are regarded as appropriate according to the netiquette manuals. At this point, Schegloff's (1968) terminating rule can be mentioned again. In his analysis, the terminating rule concerned summonses. The IRC data show that questions are repeated on IRC as well. The reason can be found in the simultaneous and overlapping character of IRC where it is easy to overlook a message.

The last phenomenon connected to opening questions that is worth mentioning is the occurrence of impolite (negatively marked) second pair parts on IRC. I do not use the adjective 'inappropriate' for this event because it goes in excess of what is regarded as inappropriate, thus being impolite, on the left side of the relational work scale (Watts et al. 2005). The frequency of such behaviour is not very high – I found only two examples; however, in my opinion they breach rules given in netiquette and evoke negative evaluations, which means an emotional reaction of the interactants. Only the anonymity of a chatroom, large social distance and 'rough equality' may explain the occurrence of such exchanges. In the extract I chose from the corpus there is an opening and a reaction to an opening message. Inappropriate, impolite messages are also sent by *SpecialED*.

- (5) 269. *james6 has JOINED the conversation.*
270. *mike_in_pa has LEFT the conversation.*
271. *james6: hi ladies*
272. *sportster_857 has LEFT the conversation.*
273. *SpecialED: great the room is broken (inappropriate)*
274. *SpecialED kicks the edge of the room (aggressive, impolite)*
275. *heatrbroken has JOINED the conversation.*
276. *dolphinsneedaqb has LEFT the conversation.*
277. *james6: broken?*
278. *SpecialED: YES JAMES ITS BROKEN (shouting, impolite)*
279. *james6: what happened*
280. *SpecialED: dont question me (imperative, inappropriate)*
281. *Wily: room?*
282. *SpecialED: dont as questions (imperative, inappropriate)*
283. *CLS2007 has LEFT the conversation.*
284. *james6: i always question*
285. *she_who_thirsts has JOINED the conversation.*

286. *SpecialED*: ask (imperative, inappropriate)

287. *james6*: i just did

288. *Wiki*: question?

James6 joined the conversation and made an appropriate greeting in line 271. *SpecialED* with her ironical message in line 273 expressed her dissatisfaction and enhanced it in line 274 “kicking the edge of the room” – aggression and face-threatening act. Afterwards, when *james6* asked why broken, *SpecialED* capitalized her message (line 278), which is against the nettiquette – “do not capitalize, it is like shouting” and thus repeated her face-threat. *James6* placed another question but *SpecialED* put him down quite inappropriately in lines 280, 282. It seems that she was playing with him. *James6* continued in conversation however unpleasant it appeared for him. Given the context of IRC, the behaviour of *SpecialED* was not in accordance with the netiquette but rather the character of the medium provided conditions for such conduct. Nobody else was involved in this conversation, only the participant *Wiki* mocked them by repetition of the words they used in their messages.

Having introduced and discussed as many of the features of opening sequences on IRC as could be found, I turn now to the final outcomes of opening techniques on IRC and (im)politeness.

5 Results and discussion

In the following, the rules and features that hold for IRC openings in the corpus specified in light of a research question How do politeness/impoliteness strategies on Internet Relay Chat differ from those in a standard face-to-face conversation (model of Watts) and what counts as polite/impolite on IRC? are discussed.

First, it was observed that Schegloff’s (1968) distribution rule and the notion of *non-terminality* of SA sequences do not function on IRC. It means that opening sequences can stand independently or in a changed order because of a high degree of disrupted adjacency, its incoherent and overlapping character. The data also show a high level of initiation attempts in contrast with further conversations. The only rule that can be applied in the IRC environment is Schegloff’s terminating rule. Various opening techniques of individual participants are repeatable, however, not necessarily successful.

Further, it has been found that the least efficient type of opening is such an opening that does not carry any address, general or nickname. This mainly refers to vague openings, such as first contact questions. On the other hand, the analysis

reveals that chat participants choose addressing by a general noun directly after AJS (100%) rather than addressing directly by a nickname. The nickname is usually used after the initial greeting to all is made and a chat participant continues in conversation. It is assumed that addressing by a general noun right after AJS is regarded as being appropriate to the situation on IRC.

Moreover, it was found that on IRC in order to be successful in the ensuing discussion, a person does not only have to differentiate herself or himself from the others by the use of capital letters, or by the use of language, such as to choose an unusual style, but also has to address other participants individually. By adding a nickname, the sender emits a positive signal and shows interest in the receiver of a message. A curious example of an initial opening greeting with a nickname (see below) is an illustration of how participants make sure a participant is the same they spoke to before.

- (6) 105. *Chief3212: there's some life. hello fatal*
 106. *pavinjohn11 has LEFT the conversation.*
 107. *FatalisticHomeRun: hey chief*
 108. *Chief3212: how are you today*
 109. *malone21139 has LEFT the conversation.*
 110. *jrbudman08 has LEFT the conversation.*
 111. *FatalisticHomeRun: are you the same chief i was giving a hard time to a while back?*
 112. *olivia354 has LEFT the conversation.*
 113. *Chief3212: yeah, I'm over it though. big shoulders....*
 114. *manwidaplan45 has JOINED the conversation.*
 115. *FatalisticHomeRun: good man*

Surprisingly, there is no record of a situation when newcomers joining the chatroom conversation receive the greeting or any response first in the corpus. They always have to open the conversation first, each by different means. The specificity of IRC is that it enables people to continue opening conversations as many times as they wish. It can be a greeting, a question or addition of a second pair part – which means joining the conversation flow directly. It is not unusual not to gain any response at all to any opening technique, as it can be seen from the examples in the above analysis. From the point of view of (im)politeness, it can be said that the strategies for joining IRC conversation can be interpreted in terms of relational work and so they are appropriate for this type of medium. However, such types of greetings known from face-to-face interaction on IRC, which means with an affiliated address, may be positively marked or in excess

of what is required by the situational context. According to Watts' (2003) theory greetings are highly ritualised and pragmaticalised EPMs (expressions of procedural meaning). He further states that EPMs are part of politic behaviour; when they are not present, their absence may be interpretable as impoliteness, and when they are in excess of what is required by the situation, they may be regarded as polite. This would imply that greeting formulae on IRC are polite and not only appropriate.

The above findings are the evidence of another dimension of conversation on IRC where the participants are not required to greet others but naturally mingle in the ongoing conversation without any face-threats or use only contact advertisements. It is also observed that greetings on IRC in the majority of cases serve either as an invitation for further talk or as a phatic element fulfilling a social function. I noticed that for the conversation to be successful, chat participants have to struggle more and utilize more opening strategies than in face-to-face conversation. As far as efficiency is concerned, the most efficient opening technique (the technique that gained the most responses) is a greeting formula (14 occurrences) followed by an opening question (13 occurrences), contact advertisement (3 occurrences). AJS as an opening strategy did not lead to any response or further conversation (no occurrence) (see Table 4).

	%	Σ
Greetings	44	14
Questions	40	13
Contact advertisements	16	3
AJS	0	0
Total		30

Table 4: The efficiency of openings in the corpus

The data from Table 4 infer that joining the chatroom is not a guarantee of any further conversation. Greetings from the side of incoming chat participants and then various types of opening questions described above are only potential starters of any IRC conversation. When the frequency of occurrence of any IRC opening technique is taken into account, the following sequence can be drawn from the analysis:

	Σ
AJS	108
Greetings	32
Questions	19
Contact advertisements	5

Table 5: The frequency of openings in the corpus

AJS is logically the most frequent opening since every chat participant enters the chatroom through this signal (that is why it is in *italics*). Taking this fact into account, the most frequent and efficient opening technique is a greeting. If it is placed into a face-to-face context, the total of 108 interactants entered the room but nobody greeted them first, they had to make a greeting (32 cases), an opening question (19 cases) or give contact advertisement (5 cases) but only 30 of them received any kind of response and could possibly continue in conversation.

One of my final findings is that the absence of personal contact in IRC conversation and the anonymity results in a relatively high degree of straightforwardness reflected in the content and the form of an opening question. The opening question such as *Where are you from?* or *asl* right after AJS or a greeting would be regarded as impolite and too direct in face-to-face conversation, but it is viewed as appropriate to the ongoing social interaction on IRC. The last point that needs to be discussed is the occurrence of negatively marked second pair parts on IRC. The frequency of such behaviour is not very high – only two examples could be found; however, they seem to breach rules given in netiquette and evoke negative evaluations. In one case the assaulted interactant left the room, in the second situation the interactant continued chatting but always had conflicts with the chat participant *SpecialED* who assaulted him (see lines 274, 278, 280, 282 and 286 in Example 5). Interestingly, in both cases it was the same attacker. As these events go in excess of what is regarded as inappropriate, they are viewed as being impolite. Only the anonymity of a chatroom, big social distance and ‘rough equality’ may explain the occurrence of such exchanges.

6 Conclusions

The aim of the article was to find answers to the research questions set at the beginning. It has been found that the most frequently used opening strategy in synchronous IRC interaction is a greeting. However, it was noticed that for furthering conversation chat participants have to make more efforts and use more opening strategies than in face-to-face talk. It is also worth noting that responses

to such greetings are quite rare or missing. Still, such exchanges are within the limits of relational work and are regarded as appropriate. From this fact it can be drawn that using opening greetings and phatic questions known from a face-to-face interaction may be polite and not merely appropriate in IRC medium.

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